

Washington, DC— Today Congressman Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.) joined colleague Jim McDermott (D-Wash) and several other Members of Congress in writing to Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao urging her to reconsider the Department of Labor's plan to close four of the nation's ten regional Employment and Training Administration (ETA) offices.

ETA offices support communities and their workers by providing a direct link between federal and state workforce programs, including the unemployment insurance program and Job Corps. The Department of Labor contends that the proposed reorganization would improve the program's management and oversight.

Blumenauer believes that the closures will reduce the quality of services that unemployed Americans and local economies depend on. He argued that the effectiveness of the remaining regional offices will be diminished, and that an overly centralized ETA system fails to recognize the uniqueness of individual economic regions in our country.

"This move ignores the needs of people who are struggling to find work," said Blumenauer. "Many states that would be affected by these closures are experiencing the highest unemployment rates in the country. If the administration proceeds with its plan, we'll lose vital services, undermining the efforts of these communities to get Americans back to work."

The regional offices slated for closure include Denver, Kansas City, New York City, and Seattle. These offices provide services to 16 states: Alaska, Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Oregon, Utah, South Dakota, Washington, and Wyoming.

A copy of the letter sent today to the Department of Labor follows:

May 16, 2003

The Honorable Elaine Chao, Secretary
U.S. Department of Labor
Frances Perkins Building
200 Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20210

Dear Secretary Chao:

Recently, several Members of Congress were notified by the Department of Labor of its plans to close four of the nation's ten regional Employment and Training Administration (ETA) offices. We oppose this decision by the Department because we feel it will reduce the effectiveness of federal workforce development programs. As you know, regional ETA offices serve a vital role for America's workers. These offices provide the crucial link between the federal and state workforce programs that are particularly important now given the dire condition of America's labor market and the myriad challenges facing state and local workforce agencies as they grapple with the unemployment crisis. ETA offices work with local businesses to help them navigate through federal regulations and optimize their access to qualified labor, and they help oversee and manage the Unemployment Insurance program and federal grants and earmarks.

The regional offices slated for closure include Denver, Kansas City, New York City, and Seattle. These offices provide services to 16 states: Alaska, Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Oregon, Utah, South Dakota, Washington, and Wyoming. Many of these states are experiencing the highest unemployment rates in the country.

Unemployment continues to rise across the nation. The unemployment rate is currently six percent. April was the third straight month in which the country lost jobs and, since January of 2001, two million jobs have vanished. The Department of Labor's own data indicate that there are more than three unemployed workers for every job opening in America.

While the Department of Labor contends that the remaining regional offices will assume the duties and responsibilities of the ETA offices subject to closure, thereby preventing degradation in services, common sense dictates that this is simply not true. The quality of ETA services will be diminished as a result of office closures because each region in our country is distinct. The labor market in Silicon Valley is much different than that of Anchorage, Alaska. ETA employees have established deep roots in their respective communities and are trained to handle the different challenges that confront each region. Reducing the number of regional offices by 40 percent is unacceptable. We urge the Department of Labor to reconsider its proposal to close the ETA offices in Seattle, Denver, Kansas City, and New York City.

Sincerely,

Jim McDermott, Earl Blumenauer, Jose Serrano, Diana DeGette, Jay Inslee, Carolyn Maloney, Sam Farr, Anthony Weiner, Rosa DeLauro, Lynn Woolsey, Dennis Kucinich, Joe Baca, Steven Rothman, Karen McCarthy, Pete Stark, Steve Israel